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The Whys Behind the Ukraine Crisis

By Robert Parry

September 04, 2014

A senior U.S. diplomat told me recently that if Russia were to occupy all of Ukraine and even neighboring Belarus that there would be zero impact on U.S. national interests. The diplomat wasn't advocating that, of course, but was noting the curious reality that Official Washington's current war hysteria over Ukraine doesn't connect to genuine security concerns.

So why has so much of the Washington Establishment – from prominent government officials to all the major media pundits – devoted so much time this past year to pounding their chests over the need to confront Russia regarding Ukraine? Who is benefiting from this eminently avoidable – yet extremely dangerous – crisis? What's driving the madness?

Of course, Washington's conventional wisdom is that America only wants "democracy" for the people of Ukraine and that Russian President Vladimir Putin provoked this confrontation as part of an imperialist design to reclaim Russian territory lost during the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. But that "group think" doesn't withstand examination. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Who's Telling the Big Lie on Ukraine?"]

The Ukraine crisis was provoked not by Putin but by a combination of the European Union's reckless move to expand its influence eastward and the machinations of U.S. neoconservatives

who were angered by Putin's collaboration with President Barack Obama to tamp down confrontations in Syria and Iran, two neocon targets for "regime change."

Plus, if "democracy promotion" were the real motive, there were obviously better ways to achieve it. Democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich pledged on Feb. 21 – in an agreement guaranteed by three European nations – to surrender much of his power and hold early elections so he could be voted out of office if the people wanted.

However, on Feb. 22, the agreement was brushed aside as neo-Nazi militias stormed presidential buildings and forced Yanukovich and other officials to flee for their lives. Rather than stand behind the Feb. 21 arrangement, the U.S. State Department quickly endorsed the coup regime that emerged as "legitimate" and the mainstream U.S. press dutifully demonized Yanukovich by noting, for instance, that a house being built for him had a pricy sauna.

The key role of the neo-Nazis, who were given several ministries in recognition of their importance to the putsch, was studiously ignored or immediately forgotten by all the big U.S. news outlets. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Ukraine's 'Dr. Strangelove' Reality."]

So, it's hard for any rational person to swallow the official line that the U.S. interest in the spiraling catastrophe of Ukraine, now including thousands of ethnic Russians killed by the coup regime's brutal "anti-terrorist operation," was either to stop Putin's imperial designs or to bring "democracy" to the Ukrainians.

That skepticism – combined with the extraordinary danger of stoking a hot war on the border of nuclear-armed Russia – has caused many observers to search for more strategic explanations behind the crisis, such as the West's desires to "frack" eastern Ukraine for shale gas or the American determination to protect the dollar as the world's currency.



Image: Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, speaking to Ukrainian and other business leaders at the National Press Club in Washington on Dec. 13, 2013, at a meeting sponsored by Chevron.

Thermo-Nuclear War Anyone?

The thinking is that when the potential cost of such an adventure, i.e. thermo-nuclear warfare that could end all life on the planet, is so high, the motivation must be commensurate. And there is logic behind that thinking although it's hard to conceive what financial payoff is big enough to risk wiping out all humanity including the people on Wall Street.

But sometimes gambles are made with the assumption that lots of money can be pocketed before cooler heads intervene to prevent total devastation — or even the more immediate risk that the Ukraine crisis will pitch Europe into a triple-dip recession that could destabilize the fragile U.S. economy, too.

In the Ukraine case, the temptation has been to think that Moscow – hit with escalating economic sanctions – will back down even as the EU and U.S. energy interests seize control of eastern Ukraine's energy reserves. The fracking could mean both a financial bonanza to investors and an end to Russia's dominance of the natural gas supplies feeding central and eastern Europe. So the economic and geopolitical payoff could be substantial.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Ukraine has Europe's third-largest shale gas reserves at 42 trillion cubic feet, an inviting target especially since other European nations, such as Britain, Poland, France and Bulgaria, have resisted fracking technology because of environmental concerns. An economically supine Ukraine would presumably be less able to say no. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Beneath the Ukraine Crisis: Shale Gas."]

Further supporting the "natural gas motive" is the fact that it was Vice President Joe Biden who demanded that President Yanukovich pull back his police on Feb. 21, a move that opened the way for the neo-Nazi militias and the U.S.-backed coup. Then, just three months later, Ukraine's largest private gas firm, Burisma Holdings, appointed Biden's son, Hunter Biden, to its board of directors.

While that might strike some of you as a serious conflict of interest, even vocal advocates for ethics in government lost their voices amid Washington's near-universal applause for the ouster of Yanukovich and warm affection for the coup regime in Kiev.

For instance, Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, dismissed the idea that Hunter Biden's new job should raise eyebrows, telling Reuters: "It can't be that because your dad is the vice president, you can't do anything."

Who Is Behind Burisma?

Soon, Burisma – a shadowy Cyprus-based company – was lining up well-connected lobbyists, some with ties to Secretary of State John Kerry, including Kerry's former Senate chief of staff David Leiter, according to lobbying disclosures.

As Time magazine reported,

"Leiter's involvement in the firm rounds out a power-packed team of politically-connected Americans that also includes a second new board member, Devon Archer, a Democratic bundler

and former adviser to John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. Both Archer and Hunter Biden have worked as business partners with Kerry's son-in-law, Christopher Heinz, the founding partner of Rosemont Capital, a private-equity company."

According to investigative journalism in Ukraine, the ownership of Burisma has been traced to Privat Bank, which is controlled by the thuggish billionaire oligarch Ihor Kolomoysky, who was appointed by the coup regime to be governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, a south-central province of Ukraine. Kolomoysky also has been associated with the financing of brutal paramilitary forces killing ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Also, regarding this energy motive, it shouldn't be forgotten that on Dec. 13, 2013, when neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland reminded Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their "European aspirations," she was at a conference sponsored by Chevron. She even stood next to the company's logo.

So, clearly energy resources and the billions of dollars that go with them should be factored in when trying to solve the mystery of why Official Washington has gone so berserk about a confrontation with Russia that boils down to whether ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine should be allowed some measure of autonomy or be put firmly under the thumb of U.S.-friendly authorities in Kiev.

There's also the issue of Russia's interest in exploring with China and other emerging economies the possibility of escaping the financial hegemony of the U.S. dollar, a move that could seriously threaten American economic dominance. According to this line of thinking, the U.S. and its close allies need to bring Moscow to its geopolitical knees – where it was under the late Boris Yeltsin – to stop any experimentation with other currencies for global trade.

Again, the advocates for this theory have a point. Protecting the Mighty Dollar is of utmost importance to Wall Street. The financial cataclysm of a potential ouster of the U.S. dollar as the world's benchmark currency might understandably prompt some powerful people to play a dangerous game of chicken with nuclear-armed Russia.

Of course, there's also the budgetary interest of NATO and the U.S. "military-industrial complex" (which helps fund many of Washington's "think tanks") to hype every propaganda opportunity to scare the American people about the "Russian threat."

And, it's a truism that every major international confrontation has multiple drivers. Think back on the motives behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Among a variety of factors were Vice President Dick Cheney's lust for oil, President George W. Bush's psychological rivalry with his father, and the neocons' interest in orchestrating "regime change" in countries considered hostile to Israel. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War."]

There are also other reasons to disdain Putin, from his bare-chested horseback riding to his retrograde policies on gay rights. But he is no Stalin and surely no Hitler.

The Neocons' 'Samson Option'

So, while it's reasonable to see multiple motives behind the brinksmanship with Russia over Ukraine, the sheer recklessness of the confrontation has, to me, the feel of an ideology or an "ism," where people are ready to risk it all for some larger vision that is central to their being.

That is why I have long considered the Ukraine crisis to be an outgrowth of the neoconservative obsession with Israel's interests in the Middle East.

Not only did key neocons – the likes of Assistant Secretary Nuland and Sen. John McCain – put themselves at the center of the coup plotting last winter but the neocons had an overriding motive: they wanted to destroy the behind-the-scenes collaboration between President Obama and President Putin who had worked together to avert a U.S. bombing campaign against the Syrian government a year ago and then advanced negotiations with Iran over limiting but not eliminating its nuclear program.

Those Obama-Putin diplomatic initiatives frustrated the desires of Israeli officials and the neocons to engineer "regime change" in those two countries. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even believed that bombing Iran's nuclear plants was an "existential" necessity.

Further, there was the possibility that an expansion of the Obama-Putin cooperation could have supplanted Israel's powerful position as a key arbiter of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Thus, the Obama-Putin relationship had to be blown up – and the Ukraine crisis was the perfect explosive for the destruction. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Why Neocons Seek to Destabilize Russia."]

Though I'm told that Obama now understands how the neocons and other hardliners outmaneuvered him over Ukraine, he has felt compelled to join in Official Washington's endless Putin-bashing, causing a furious Putin to make clear that he cannot be counted on to assist Obama on tricky foreign policy predicaments like Syria and Iran.

As I wrote last April,

"There is a 'little-old-lady-who-swallowed-the-fly' quality to neocon thinking. When one of their schemes goes bad, they simply move to a bigger, more dangerous scheme. If the Palestinians and Lebanon's Hezbollah persist in annoying you and troubling Israel, you target their sponsors with 'regime change' – in Iraq, Syria and Iran. If your 'regime change' in Iraq goes badly, you escalate the subversion of Syria and the bankrupting of Iran.

"Just when you think you've cornered President Barack Obama into a massive bombing campaign against Syria – with a possible follow-on war against Iran – Putin steps in to give Obama a peaceful path out, getting Syria to surrender its chemical weapons and Iran to agree to constraints on its nuclear program. So, this Obama-Putin collaboration has become your new threat. That means you take aim at Ukraine, knowing its sensitivity to Russia.

"You support an uprising against elected President Viktor Yanukovich, even though neo-Nazi militias are needed to accomplish the actual coup. You get the U.S. State Department to

immediately recognize the coup regime although it disenfranchises many people of eastern and southern Ukraine, where Yanukovich had his political base.

“When Putin steps in to protect the interests of those ethnic Russian populations and supports the secession of Crimea (endorsed by 96 percent of voters in a hastily called referendum), your target shifts again. Though you’ve succeeded in your plan to drive a wedge between Obama and Putin, Putin’s resistance to your Ukraine plans makes him the next focus of ‘regime change.’

“Your many friends in the mainstream U.S. news media begin to relentlessly demonize Putin with a propaganda barrage that would do a totalitarian state proud. The anti-Putin ‘group think’ is near total and any accusation – regardless of the absence of facts – is fine.”

Yet, by risking a potential nuclear confrontation with Russia — the equivalent of the old lady swallowing a horse – the neocons have moved beyond what can be described in a children’s ditty. It has become more like a global version of Israel’s “Samson Option,” the readiness to use nuclear weapons in a self-destructive commitment to eliminate your enemies whatever the cost to yourself.

But what is particularly shocking in this case is how virtually everyone in U.S. officialdom – and across the mainstream media spectrum – has bought into this madness.